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AUTHOR(S):

Ouyyanont, Porphant; Tsubouchi, Yoshihiro

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Aspects of the Place and Role of the Chinese in Late Nineteenth Century Bangkok

Porphant OUYANONT* and Tsubouchi Yoshihiro**

Abstract

This paper uses the Postal Census of 1883 to examine certain aspects of the place and role of the Chinese in Bangkok. The Census breaks down house occupation by ethnic origin, social status, and also by the various types of materials used in construction. Very clear, at a surprisingly early date, is the existence of a market for rented shop-houses (nearly all were brick houses), with the royal family and members of the Thai nobility prominent among those providing capital for shop house construction. And it was largely the Chinese commercial groups who were the tenants.

I The 1883 Bangkok Postal Census as a Major Source¹⁾

The 1883 Bangkok Postal Census (*Sarabanchi*) is significant for understanding the economy and society of Bangkok in the latter half of the nineteenth century. It recorded the names of the residents (household heads) and their occupations and/or economic activities, social relation of masters and their corvée labor, ethnicity, type of houses, owner or renter status, payment of Chinese head tax, and addresses classified by roads, irrigation canals, and clustered villages along river, the departments to which household heads were attached, the title and/or rank of household heads. The Postal Census also provides information on the public infrastructure in Bangkok, including bridges, forts, city walls and gates, hospitals, hotels, schools, canals, rivers, theaters, temples, churches, rice mills, rice warehouses, fresh food markets, and so on [Thailand, The Department of Post and Telegraph 1883a; 1883b; 1883c; 1883d].

The Bangkok Postal Census was published by the Department of Post and Telegraph to expedite the postal service. To facilitate the mail service, a register of the population was

* School of Economics, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, Nonthaburi 11120, Thailand. E-mail: ecasopor@samsorn.stou.ac.th (Guest Scholar and JSPS Postdoctoral Fellow, Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University from June 1998–April 2000)

** 坪内良博, Department of Multi-Cultural World, Konan Women's University, 6-2-23 Morikita-cho, Nada-ku, Kobe 658-0001, Japan

1) This paper draws on material from ASAFAS special papers by Porphant and Tsubouchi [Porphant and Tsubouchi 2000a; 2000b]. That paper discussed also the general importance of the Postal Census and suggested ways in which the material could be used for further our knowledge about nineteenth century Bangkok.

needed. To this end, the Postal Census was completed in 1883. Collection postal boxes were set up in all parts of the city. Each house had affixed to its face a small board bearing a number, and a roll of names and addresses were compiled to facilitate mail deliveries. A publication by the department of Post and Telegraph in 1963 asserts that the Census covered the following districts [Thailand, The Department of Post and Telegraph 1963: 13].

1. Samsen in the Northern part of Bangkok
2. Saraparathum in the Eastern part of Bangkok
3. Bangkoalam in the Southern part of Bangkok
4. Talad Plu in the Western part of Bangkok (in Thonburi)

However, the coverage significantly exceeded this. The Census covered also Bangkhen, Bangkokpi, and the areas adjacent to Nonthaburi and the surrounding countryside on the Thonburi side, especially along the canals.

The Census was divided into four volumes, with varying titles. Broadly speaking, Volumes 2, 3, and 4 divide the area according not to location but according to the type of communication artery. Thus, Volume 2 records the residences along “roads and lanes” (*tanon lae trok*). This classification covered many residences in the central districts, especially along roads as Charoen Krung, Bumrung Muang, Fuang Nakorn.

Volume 3 records residences in “clustered villages along rivers” (literally clustered villages and rivers, *ban mu lae lamnam*). These include the numerous small groups of inhabitants such as those found in Bangrak, and Dao Kanong.

Volume 4 covers residences along “irrigation canals” (*ku lae klong lumpradong*). These were usually very small and scattered groups. It should be remembered that Bangkok had spread steadily through the extension of such canals since the beginning of nineteenth century, with the irrigation canals usually leading from the larger canals. As far as the Census is concerned the areas covered in Volume 4 were the then rural areas, especially on the Thonburi side of the Chaophraya River.

We can see that the classification of the postal area in this way presents certain difficulties of analysis. Volume 1 did not use commercial arteries, but simply listed government officials and royalty. But such residences were then sometimes included in the subsequent volumes. In order to avoid the problems arising from such overlap we will use Volumes 2, 3, and 4 in this paper.

It is unfortunately now not possible to locate all the residences in the 1883 Census. Many of the small waterways and even some of the larger canals and roads have disappeared, and their original location cannot be traced. Table 1 shows the total number of houses recorded in Volumes 2, 3, and 4 of the Census.

Table 1 shows the numbers of houses registered in each volume of the 1883 Postal Census. The total of 32,156 houses were distributed in various parts of Bangkok: road and lane areas (7,790), clustered village along river areas (9,461) and irrigation canal areas

Table 1 Houses in Bangkok Postal Census of 1883

Volume	Number of Houses
Vol. 2: Roads and lanes	7,790
Vol. 3: Clustered villages along rivers	9,461
Vol. 4: Irrigation canals	14,905
Total	32,156

Sources: [Thailand, The Department of Post and Telegraph 1883b; 1883c; 1883d]

Table 2 Household Heads by Ethnic Group in Bangkok Postal Census of 1883

Ethnicity	Number	Percentage
Thai	22,089	69.8
Chinese	8,531	26.9
Kaek	583	1.8
Westerners	324	1.0
Burmese	76	less than 1
Vietnamese	38	less than 1
Lao	9	less than 1
Mon	8	less than 1
Total	31,658	100.0

Sources: [Thailand, The Department of Post and Telegraph 1883b; 1883c; 1883d]

(14,905). Table 2 shows registered numbers of household heads by ethnic group. Of course, the numbers of household heads are lower than the numbers of houses because there were some vacant houses of unidentified (unknown) household heads in the Postal Census. Thais constituted the largest share of the household heads (70 percent). Chinese were the second largest group (27 percent), and Kaek (Indians and Malays) made up the third largest group (2 percent), followed by westerners (1 percent). The other ethnic groups were of Southeast Asian origin: Burmese, Vietnamese, Lao, and Mon.

II Review of Related Literature

Several scholars have employed the 1883 Postal Census to estimate population and shed light the economic basis of Bangkok including Sternstein [1982], Tsubouchi [1984], Wilson [1989], Terwiel [1989]. Sternstein attempted to reestimate Bangkok's population which has always been subject to various widely different estimates. He concluded that the city of Bangkok in the early 1880s contained 119,700 of which the Chinese, the largest alien group, numbered 23,000 [Sternstein 1982: 80]. If the population which lived in a wide surrounding area was included, the population of Krung Thep was approximated 169,300, and some 27,000 were

Table 3 The Occupations of Heads of Households by Nationality and Percent in the City of Bangkok in 1883

Occupation	Thai	Chinese	Malay	Kaek	Westerner	Other
Farmers & fishermen	25	12	13	2	–	31
Makers of products	13	16	23	6	2	7
Laborers & construction	6	9	9	neg	–	4
Transport & communications	1	neg	5	6	17	3
Clerical workers	8	3	4	3	8	1
Sales workers	14	40	22	66	10	9
Service workers	7	6	6	6	3	4
Professional & technical workers	5	2	3	3	27	2
Administrators & managers	5	3	3	1	28	2
Armed forces	7	neg	2	–	–	33
Other and unknown	9	9	10	7	5	4
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Sources: Sternstein [1982: 84, Table IV; 1979: 17, Table 4]

Note: neg = negligible

Chinese [*ibid.* 78]. Sternstein has shown that a substantial proportion of household heads were occupied as farmers and fishermen, (e.g., 25 percent of the Thai households) (Table 3).

Sternstein's work is valuable, but it is unfortunate that the figures are given only in percentages of *each ethnic group*. Thus, for example, 12 percent of the Chinese were farmers and fishermen, but to see their role in perspective we need absolute numbers. Our analysis in the next section repairs this omission. Also, some occupations included in the 1883 Census are omitted from Sternstein's compilation. Such occupations include government officials engaged in various government departments, corvée laborers (a very numerous group), gardeners, and so on.

Our paper will focus to explore in more detail the pattern of occupation, especially the Chinese population. Constance Wilson used the Postal Census to suggest that in 1883, Bangkok's economy was based on an ethnic division of labor. The Chinese played an important role in marketing, commerce, employees, and manufacturing, while the indigenous Thais played a more moderate role in business development. The city was already very much a marketing and trading center with no fewer than 42 percent of the employed population engaged in "marketing" and a further 15 percent in various kinds of manufacturing. Government service accounted for only 16 percent of employment [Wilson 1989: 55]. Wilson also suggests that we should not underestimate the role of Thai labor in the nineteenth century in the development of an urban commercial economy. Thais were not only predominant in the categories of "government officials" and "agricultural production," they also played an important part in "marketing" and "commercial and manufacturing" employment.

This suggests that the historical role of the Thais in urban economic development needs to be reinterpreted. Wilson's work is important for understanding the economic basis of Bangkok. However, she used only the second and third volume of the Postal Census. In fact,

the fourth volume is very important. The fourth volume covers the ditches and irrigation canal areas which employed many in the wide area surrounding the capital such as Thonburi. Tsubouchi [1984] also explored the ethnicity of the residents, types of house, ownership of the houses, and occupation of the residents in “New Road” or “Charoen Krung Road” by using the Postal Census of 1883. He drew several conclusions. The types of building were predominantly Chinese and business-oriented with the living and shop area on ground level, instead of being constructed in the typical Thai “stilt” fashion. The landlords were, however, predominantly Thais, royal, noble or commoners, who considered their houses to be investments. The residents varied, including Thais, Chinese, Europeans, Malays, and other moslems. Thais and Chinese were the least segregated from each other,²⁾ and there were a number of instances of women with Chinese blood but with Thai names [*ibid.*].

Terwiel [1989] attempted to reestimate the figure of the Bangkok’s population in the 1850s. He used various estimates by foreign visitors, including Malloch (1827), Schuurman (1828), Dean (1835), Neale (1840), and Pallegoix (1854). After careful consideration of the problem of various widely differing estimates, he concluded that the city contained no more than 50,000 to 100,000 people around the 1850s [Terwiel 1989: 233]. That is far from the 300,000–500,000 often quoted. Terwiel’s estimate was based on Sternstein, whose work was based on the Postal Census [Sternstein 1980: 126; 1982: 78]. This suggests a population in the early 1880s of perhaps 120,000 people [Terwiel 1989: 232].

In summary, some scholars have already utilized the 1883 Postal Census as a source to reestimate the population in Bangkok in the early 1880s [Sternstein 1982; Terwiel 1989] and the ethnic division of labor in Bangkok [Wilson 1989]. What is still needed is a systematic and detailed work of the role of the Chinese in Bangkok’s development. This role included the Chinese contributions to house construction, supplies of labor in agricultural production, and in various economic activities.

III Findings

The role of the Chinese is a familiar theme in Southeast Asian history. This role has been subject to analysis by many scholars,³⁾ and it is not the purpose of this section to tread familiar ground. Rather, it is intended to draw attention to the 1883 Postal Census which can be used to supplement our knowledge of the Chinese in Bangkok towards the close of the nineteenth century.

The Postal Census is itself a reflection of enhanced economic activity in Bangkok, and clearly the authorities planned the Census as a way of delineating, and perhaps controlling, the city’s growth. The early 1880s was, indeed, a period of expansion in Southeast Asian trade, and Bangkok developed as a major international port city at this time. Each year saw

2) In fact there are a number of instances where individuals with Chinese names are classified as “Thais” in the Census.

3) For example, Skinner [1957], Jiang [1966], Cushman [1975], Sarasin [1977], Nidhi [1982].

thousands of Chinese immigrants; growing exports of rice and teak; new commercial and residential buildings; the opening of western agency houses, and other manifestations of development.

It might be asked, “why were Thai king favorably disposed towards Chinese migrants?” To answer this question fully would take us beyond the scope of this paper, but three points are of particular relevance. First, the early Thai kingdoms (especially Ayutthaya) had a long tradition of absorbing outsiders, and the influence of Chinese, as traders and officials, was strong. The development of the Thai language also shows strong Chinese influence, especially after the mid-seventeenth century. Second, Thai royalty itself had strong Chinese connections. Taksin, who established his capital at Thonburi after the Burmese destruction of Ayutthaya in 1767, was of mixed Chinese (Teochiu) blood, and he welcomed his countrymen as a means to build the prosperity of his new capital. Thirdly, Thailand throughout the nineteenth century had only a small population, and, like other countries in the region, relied on the Chinese to provide both cheap labor and a source of skills and entrepreneurship.

We now know that the early 1880s was, in fact, just the beginning of a long period of prosperity which would transform Bangkok by the first decade of the new century. The 1883 Postal Census, therefore, gives us a fascinating glimpse of a city at the onset of change. Within the static picture presented by the Census we can perceive the dynamic: the brick buildings, Chinese coolies and traders, Thai investors, and extending roadways from the traditional waterways.

Tables 4, 5 and 6 summarize the data from the Census.

We can readily confirm that employment in Bangkok in 1883 was based on an ethnic division of labor. In both “commerce and manufacturing” and “marketing” employment, Chinese outnumbered Thais. Bangkok housed a substantial number of Chinese engaged in “commerce and marketing.” Around one-third of Chinese household heads worked in this field (2,630 Chinese). Thais were the second most numerous, with 1,675 (8 percent of Thai household heads). Employment opportunities in “commerce and manufacturing” were also open to other ethnic groups (174 Kaeks, 14 westerners, 8 Burmese, 3 Vietnamese, 3 Lao). Both Thais and Chinese were strong in “marketing.” One-fifth of Chinese household heads were employed in “marketing” activities (1,612 Chinese). Seven percent of Thai household heads were engaged in this field (1,441 Thais). Kaeks (55), westerners (4), Vietnamese (4), and Mon (7) were also engaged in “marketing.”

However, these findings run counter to the general belief that the economic role of the Thais was confined to government service as government officials and corvée laborers, and agriculture. In fact, Thais played an active role in Bangkok’s commercial development in a wide range of “marketing,” “commerce and manufacturing,” and “employees and workers” activities.

We must, however, emphasize the dominance of the Chinese in these activities. With around one-third of the numbers of Thais, the Chinese had significantly higher *absolute* numbers engaged in marketing, commerce and manufacturing, and almost three-quarters of the

numbers of Thais engaged as employees and workers.

The Thais clearly dominated in government official positions in various departments (*krom*) (and even more so in *corvée* service), with few Chinese, and even fewer westerners, Kaeks, and other Southeast Asian ethnics holding positions as government officials (Thais, 2,746 household heads; and non-Thais, 92). The predominant occupation of the Thais (30 percent of Thai household heads) was in agricultural production. Also notable in this category of occupation, though much fewer than the Thais, were Chinese (1,100 Chinese or around 14 percent of the Chinese household heads). There were also Kaek and Burmese engaged in this field (94 Kaeks and 63 Burmese). This suggests that the role of Chinese in economic development in Thai history is by no means confined to urban non-agricultural activities.

Although the Thais also dominated “professional” activities (612 Thais, 269 Chinese, 30 Kaeks, 23 westerners, 1 Mon) and, perhaps, surprisingly, “employees and workers” (507 Thais, 359 Chinese, 37 Kaeks, 23 westerners, 1 Burmese, 1 Mon), the Chinese were active in these fields and employed as doctors, tax farmers, skilled workers, heads of coolies, workers in shipping and boat making, rice mills and saw mills.

We can see from the Tables below, too, that the early 1880s saw an enormous economic diversification in occupations, which was underpinned by the growth of the rice trade and economic expansion, and the growth of the city’s population as a result of immigration by the Chinese. Bangkok in 1883 was already very much a marketing and commercial trading center. The Census indicates that one-fourth of the employed population was engaged in “agriculture,” while no fewer than 28 percent were engaged in the non-agricultural sector including “commerce and manufacturing,” “marketing,” and “professional” occupations in Bangkok (Pranakorn and Thonburi). Government officials accounted for only 9 percent of total employment. If agricultural areas such those as in Thonburi and the suburbs of Bangkok are excluded, more than 60 percent of the employed population was engaged in “commerce and manufacturing,” “marketing,” and “professional” occupations in Bangkok city proper (Table 4).

An interesting section of the Postal Census deals with the types of houses occupied within the census area. This information is summarized in Table 5. We can see that the Census distinguishes between type of construction, ethnic group of the owner, and social status, and it therefore provides us with a glimpse of Bangkok society in 1883.

We may notice several features from Table 5. Elsewhere Porphant, one of the authors, has written of the close connection between speculative construction for the rental market (especially shop houses or row houses), and demonstrated that these houses were often built by the royal family (the Privy Purse) or the noblemen, and the development of paved roads away from the main canals from the 1880s [Porphant 1999]. The Postal Census gives us further insight, although unfortunately the construction of shop houses was then only in its infancy.

The “shop-house” appears to have long been characteristic of Chinese communities, and they were found throughout areas of Chinese settlement. As early as the thirteenth century a Chinese traveler in Angkor, Cambodia, contrasted styles of trading, noting in Cambodia it was

Table 4 Occupations of Household Heads in City and Agricultural Areas in Bangkok in 1883 by Ethnic Group

	Thai	Chinese	Westerner	Kaek	Lao	Burmese	Vietnamese	Mon	Total
(1) Agricultural production (e.g., farmers, gardeners)	6,281 [29.5]	1,100 [13.8]	1 [less than 1]	94 [15.1]	0 [–]	63 [80.8]	3 [9.4]	2 [16.7]	7,544 [24.9]
(2) Marketing ^a	1,441 [6.8]	1,612 [20.2]	4 [2.7]	55 [8.8]	0 [–]	0 [–]	4 [12.5]	7 [58.3]	3,123 [10.3]
(3) Professional ^b	612 [2.9]	269 [3.4]	23 [15.9]	30 [4.8]	0 [–]	1 [1.3]	0 [–]	1 [8.3]	936 [3.1]
(4) Employees and workers ^c	517 [2.4]	363 [4.5]	30 [20.7]	38 [6.1]	0 [–]	1 [1.3]	0 [–]	1 [8.3]	950 [3.1]
(5) Commerce and manufacturing ^d	1,675 [7.9]	2,630 [32.9]	14 [9.6]	174 [27.9]	3 [27.3]	8 [10.2]	3 [9.4]	0 [–]	4,507 [14.9]
(6) Government officials (departmental heads and officials)	2,746 [12.9]	62 [less than 1]	5 [3.4]	4 [less than 1]	1 [9.1]	1 [1.3]	19 [59.4]	0 [–]	2,838 [9.4]
(7) Corvée service	4,245 [19.9]	0 [–]	0 [–]	9 [1.4]	1 [9.1]	0 [–]	0 [–]	0 [–]	4,255 [14.1]
(8) Other (e.g., retired government officials, servants)	329 [1.5]	30 [less than 1]	1 [less than 1]	7 [1.1]	4 [36.4]	0 [–]	0 [–]	0 [–]	371 [1.2]
(9) Unknown	3,458 [16.2]	1,909 [23.9]	67 [46.2]	213 [34.1]	2 [18.2]	4 [5.1]	3 [9.4]	1 [8.3]	5,657 [18.7]
Total	21,304 [100.0]	7,975 [100.0]	145 [100.0]	624 [100.0]	11 [100.0]	78 [100.0]	32 [100.0]	12 [100.0]	30,181 [100.0]

Sources: [Thailand, The Department of Post and Telegraph 1883b; 1883c; 1883d]

Notes: Figures in brackets are in percentage. Fuller detail of the breakdown of household heads' Occupation, see Porphant and Tsubouchi [2000a: 21–22].

^a e.g., food, sweet makers and dealers marketing, grocery and general traders, seafood and animal dealers, spice dealers, and fruit dealers^b e.g., doctors and midwives, tax farmers, engineers, skilled workers^c e.g., heads of coolies, shipping and boat makers, accountants and clerks, caretakers and guards workers in rice mills and saw mills^d e.g., rice mills, saw mills, textile and cloth traders, liquor, opium and lottery traders, manufacturing production, rice trade, owners of brothels, pawnshops, gambling houses, drug traders, businessmen, managers, goods traders, forest product dealers

women “who are engaged in commerce Every day, a market takes place which begins at six in the morning and ends at noon. There is no market made up of shops where people live . . .” [quoted in Chandler 1983: 73. We are grateful to Malcolm Falkus for this reference].

Looking at the Census, we may notice first the characteristics of “Brick Building” (mostly brick building shop houses). The Chinese predominately occupied various types of brick buildings. There were 2,840 houses of which some 1,651 houses were occupied by Chinese (60 percent of total brick building). Interestingly, the Chinese outnumbered Thais in every category of brick buildings (brick buildings owned by noblemen; 449 Chinese, 133 Thais, brick buildings owned by the Privy Purse Bureau; 326 Chinese, 292 Thais, brick building owned by

commoners; 876 Chinese, and 693 Thais). Many of the brick buildings were constructed on Bumrung Muang (226 houses), Charoen Krung (380) and Fuang Nakorn (186) running from the area of the Royal Palace [Thailand, The Department of Post and Telegraph 1883b]. This indicates that the walled royal palace area and its surrounding area were the most growing commercial activities with a strong Chinese presence concentrated along major roads. The expansion of brick buildings produced fine buildings outside the city wall and accelerated the change in the city character from water-based to land settlements toward more commercial areas.

Secondly, the Chinese also predominated as occupiers of various types of shop-houses (*rong*). There were 7,628 shop-houses of which some 4,422 were occupied by the Chinese (57 percent of the total shop-houses occupied by the Chinese). Shop-houses were not only concentrated along major roads but also were built in other areas in Bangkok including clustered village and river areas and ditches and irrigation canal areas [Porphant and Tsubouchi 2000b: 9]. This indicates that the growing commercial activities with a strong Chinese presence were extended towards the suburbs. Chinese communities created a significant demand for housing and housing for Chinese accommodation expanded especially from the 1870s.

Thirdly, Table 5 also shows that various types of houses were occupied by various ethnic groups. Thais predominantly owned and occupied the traditional Siamese houses such as the traditional Thai house without gable, palaces, houses made of bamboo and wooden walled, houses with a wall or partition of woven bamboo strips, atap thatch, *kachairng* cane binding, houses made of wood, houses with walls of planks, and houses made of bamboo. The westerners mainly lived in houses with walls of planks (39 household heads), Thai traditional houses without gable (19), brick buildings owned by commoners (19), brick building owned by noblemen (10), brick buildings owned by the Privy Purse Bureau (7), and so on (Table 5). Kaek mainly occupied houses with walls of planks (152), houses with atap thatch (135), shop-houses (owned by commoners), brick buildings (owned by commoners) (70), floating houses (67), houses made of bamboo and wooden walled (53), houses with *kachairng* cane binding (34), brick buildings owned by noblemen (31), brick buildings owned by the Privy Purse Bureau (22), houses made of bamboo (16), and so on. Of other Southeast Asian ethnic groups, Table 5 reveals that while the majority of Burmese lived in houses with atap (39), and shop-houses owned by commoners (27), Vietnamese mainly occupied houses with walls of planks (20), houses made of bamboo and wooden-walled houses (7). Lao mainly occupied houses made of bamboo and wooden-walled houses (3), and shop-houses own by commoners (2). Mon mainly lived in houses with atap thatch (3) (Table 5).

Figures in Table 5 reflect two significant points. Firstly, the growth of housing in Bangkok in the nineteenth century was partly a response to the influx of Chinese immigrants. The Chinese were responsible for many changes in housing development in Bangkok. As the largest non-Thai group, they played an important role in creating demand for housing, especially brick houses. They accounted for a significant portion of house rental in Bangkok:

Table 5 Types of Houses Occupied by Various Ethnic Groups in Bangkok in 1883

Type of House*	Thai	Chinese	Westerner	Kaek	Lao	Burmese	Vietnamese	Mon	Total	Percent
Palace	42	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	42	less than1
Brick building owned by nobleman**	133	449	10	31	0	0	0	0	623	1.9
Brick building owned by the Privy Purse Bureau**	292	326	7	22	0	0	0	0	647	1.1
Brick building owned by commoner**	603	876	19	70	0	1	1	0	1,570	5
House made of bamboo and wooden walled (<i>tir</i>)	1,127	265	1	53	3	2	7	0	1,458	4.7
House with a wall or partition of woven bamboo strips (<i>fatir</i>)	1,222	237	0	13	0	1	5	1	1,479	4.7
House with atap thatch	5,080	111	2	135	1	39	0	3	5,371	17.2
House with <i>kachairng</i> cane binding	1,934	54	0	34	1	1	1	0	2,025	6.5
House made of wood (wooden house)	405	48	1	21	1	0	1	0	477	1.5
House with walls of planks (wooden walled)	4,796	464	39	152	0	1	20	1	5,473	17.5
House made by weaving bamboo strips to make a partition or fence(<i>kattir</i>)	319	42	2	3	0	0	0	0	366	1.2
House made of bamboo Slatted houses (<i>natang</i>)	687	27	0	16	0	0	0	0	730	2.3
House with zinc roof	62	39	0	4	0	0	0	0	105	less than1
House made by coconut leaves	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	less than1
House with <i>sumruad</i> cane binding	12	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	12	less than1
	303	3	0	4	0	0	0	0	310	less than1
Traditional Thai house without gable (<i>panya</i>)	94	11	19	3	0	2	0	0	129	less than1
Shop-house (<i>rong</i>) owned by nobleman***	105	388	0	12	0	0	0	0	505	1.6
Shop-house(<i>rong</i>) owned by the Privy Purse Bureau***	33	27	1	1	0	0	0	0	62	less than1
Shop-house (<i>rong</i>) owned by commoner***	2,938	4,007	6	79	2	27	1	1	7,061	22.5
Row of rooms (<i>tim taew</i>) for guards and workers of nobleman	28	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	31	less than1
Row of rooms (<i>tim taew</i>) for guards and workers of general people	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	less than1
Floating house	824	781	4	67	0	0	1	0	1,677	5.4
Boat house	40	74	0	0	0	0	0	0	114	less than1
Unspecified land houses (<i>ruan</i>)	157	45	4	9	0	0	0	0	215	less than1
Not reported	561	189	26	18	0	1	1	2	798	2.5
Total	21,800	8,469	141	747	8	75	38	8	31,286	100.0

Sources: [Thailand, The Department of Post and Telegraph 1883b; 1883c; 1883d]

* The distribution of houses by types in various areas of Bangkok in 1883, see Porphant and Tsubouchi [2000b: 11].

** Brick building is the term used in the Census (*tuk*), but nearly all were, in fact, shop-houses (*hong taew* or row houses)*** Unlike the *tuk*, these shop-houses (*rong*) were built of traditional timber.

Table 6 Number of Houses by Type of Ownership and by Ethnic Group in Bangkok in 1883

	Thai	Chinese	Westerner	Kaek	Lao	Burmese	Vietnamese	Mon	Total
Owned	20,019	4,431	81	597	9	74	36	6	25,253
Rented	941	3,714	26	120	0	1	1	0	4,803
Lived rent-free (<i>asai</i>)	567	197	5	25	0	0	0	0	794
n.a.	515	170	26	16	0	1	1	2	731
Total	22,042	8,512	138	758	9	76	38	8	31,581

Sources: [Thailand, The Department of Post and Telegraph 1883b; 1883c; 1883d]

almost 80 percent of total renters were Chinese (3,714 out of 4,803). Thais and Kaek ranked second and third respectively (Table 6). In the brick buildings owned by the Privy Purse Bureau, the Chinese, as major residents, engaged in a variety of occupations. They ranged from the lowest to the highest, including traders, financiers, shopkeepers, tax farmers, skilled craftsmen and unskilled coolies [Porphant and Tsubouchi 2000b: 25–37]. Construction of brick buildings, mostly shop-houses or row houses, could be considered as a form of investment by noblemen, the Privy Purse Bureau, and wealthy commoners. The Chinese were a significant contributor to the economic boom in Bangkok in the nineteenth century. Secondly, we should consider the impact of road construction on brick building investment. Brick building investment, usually in two-story shop houses, was closely related to land investment by the Privy Purse Bureau and noblemen, and construction was undertaken along major roads: Charoen Krung, Fuang Nakorn, and Bumrung Muang, within the city wall and in the main commercial districts in Sampeng [Thailand, The Department of Post and Telegraph 1883b]. The growth of brick shop-houses played an important part in shaping the landscape of Bangkok.

It will be noticed that there were large numbers recorded in the Postal Census as “corvée service” status.⁴⁾ This might, at first sight, seem surprising. Table 4 indicates that some 14 percent of Bangkok’s population were in “corvée service.” Indeed, some such individuals appear to have lived in quite substantial houses (3,825 out of 4,252). Only a few corvée paid rent (148 out of 4,252), and lived rent free (166 out of 4,252) (Table 7).

We have translated the term “*khuen*” as “corvée service” status. Although we can not know for certain, it is highly probable that the term “*khuen*” denoted personal status rather than economic circumstances. At the time of the Postal Census King Chulalongkorn had only just begun (in 1874) his long program of eliminating corvée labor (*phrai*) and slave status from Thai society, a progress which would not be finished until 1899 or so in the early twentieth century.⁵⁾

The year 1899 saw a law which formally put an end to corvée, and *phrai* who wished to be

4) For the discussions of the corvée in *sakdina*-system in early Bangkok period, see Prince Dilok [1908 (reprinted 2000): 42–60], Akin [1996: Chapter 5, 93–114], Seksan [1989: Chapter III, 124–213].

5) The reform was effected by the edicts of 1899.

Table 7 Number of Houses Occupied by Corvée Labor by Type of Ownership in Bangkok in 1883

Type of Ownership	Number
Owned	3,825
Rented	148
Rent-free	166
Not known	113
Total	4,252

Sources: [Thailand, The Department of Post and Telegraph 1883b; 1883c; 1883d]

free could pay head tax in lieu of corvée labor. The amount of the tax varied from 1.5 baht to 6 baht per year [Ingram 1971: 59]. One of the major reasons for eliminating corvée labor (*phrai*) and slave status from Thai society was that as the rice trade and market economy flourished from the 1860s, the need to control manpower in the *sakdina*-system became obsolete. The possession of money, not men was now the way to increase wealth. The growth of the economy opened opportunities for *phrai* to earn money income from activities such as rice cultivation. With the money revenue, the court and the noblemen began to use *paid* Chinese laborers instead of the *phrai* for public or private works; with a greater opportunity for cash income, a number of *phrai* were, in turn, able to afford the money payment in lieu of corvée.⁶⁾

At the time of the Postal Census a great many individuals would have been *phrai* or slaves and been obligated as slaves, but many, too, would have reached economic positions which belied that status. Thai history has, indeed, many examples of *phrai*/slaves who became wealthy, and successful in business.

We should note too that, in the nineteenth century, “in Thai society, there was no slave market, nor any evidence of selling slaves for profit, although it has been said that a third of population were slaves” [Bowring cited in Akin 1996: 191]. Slaves in Siam were well treated. Sir John Bowring, wrote in 1857:

Bishop Pallegoix states, that slaves are, “well treated in Siam as well as servants are treated in France”; and I from what I have seen, would be inclined to go even farther, and say, better than servants are treated in England. This is proved by the fact that whenever they are emancipated, they always sell themselves again. Master can not ill-treated their slaves, for they have always the remedy of paying the money they represent; and he must be a very worthless character who can not get somebody to advance the sum. If they are treated harshly, you may take certain that generally it is the man's own fault. In small families, the slaves are treated like the children of the masters; they are consulted in all matters, and each man feels that as his master is prosperous so is he. The slaves, on the other hand are faithful, and when their master is poor, will devote every Fuang [the smallest Siamese coin] they can beg to his necessities, and as long as he will keep them, will pass through any amount of hardship. Seldom do you see attachment between masters and paid servants in England. [Bowring cited in Prince Dilok 2000 [1908]: 41]

6) For this discussion, see Seksan [1989], Akin [1996], Ingram [1971].

The suggestion here, then, is that those of “corvée service” status in the Postal Census are simply carrying an indication of personal rather than economic circumstance. They might be employers, craftsmen, or civil servants, and the term “*khuen*” can not be used as a measure of economic status.

IV Conclusion

We can see clearly that the snapshot picture provided by the 1883 Postal Census indicates both the considerable presence of the Chinese, and the close relationship between the Chinese commercial groups and the landlords. The latter were often residents of the royal family, the Privy Purse, or the Thai nobility. The relationship centered on the construction of shop-houses (nearly all were brick houses), and was important in determining the development of a district Chinese quarter. Shop-house construction also involved opening of new roads, which in turn were largely inhabited by the Chinese. It is evident that even in 1883 the smaller ethnic minorities, the Vietnamese, Mon, Kaek, and Lao lived outside the central districts covered by the Census.

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